

OBSERVATIONS OF A YOUNG NATURALIST IN THE LOWER BLACKWOOD VALLEY IN THE YEAR 1919

By D. H. PERRY, Victoria Park.

As a member of one of the Forests Department's survey and assessment teams, I was working in the region between the Margaret River and the lower Blackwood in 1919. The Blackwood River valley from Darradup to Augusta had apparently been a favoured hunting ground of the Aborigines prior to the coming of the European. Whilst there were none remaining at the time I was working there there was much evidence to be seen of their passing. A fine specimen of an edge ground stone axe was picked up and kept by me for many years and in 1958 was handed to the W.A. Museum (See "The Edge Ground Axes of South Western Australia," W. D. L. Ride, *W. Aust. Nat.*, 6 (7), 1958: 175).

One quite common feature to be seen were the remains of their pit traps for catching kangaroos and wallabies. I have not seen these pits anywhere else but along this stretch of the Blackwood valley. They were always constructed on a game trail and consisted of a pit from three to four feet long, by eight inches wide, and two feet six inches to three feet deep, the long axis being along the trail. Many of them were in an excellent state of preservation at that time and the game trails they were on were clearly defined and still very much in use. We had no idea what these pits were when we first encountered them but we later learned from an old bushman that they were the work of the Aborigines. He also explained that after the pit had been dug, the excavated soil was removed to a distance and the hole then carefully covered with a lattice of small sticks and blackboy leaves, and finally with dead leaves and earth and made to look as natural and undisturbed as possible. The kangaroo or wallaby coming down the trail to the river flats to feed and drink, or perhaps being driven by the hunters, would crash through the light covering into the pit and would hang suspended by the hips, its feet not being able to reach the bottom, the animal was unable to spring out.*

It was whilst working in this region that I was able to observe at first hand an incident that confirmed something I had been told by local bushmen. This was that a kangaroo dog that hunted Brush or Black-gloved Wallabies (*Macropus irma*) would never die of old age. We relied on kangaroos to a certain extent as a source of fresh meat and kept a dog in the camp to hunt them. He would chase both wallabies and kangaroos, and at Layman's Flat on the Blackwood one day, I saw this dog killed instantly as the result of deliberate action by a Brush Wallaby.

I had taken the dog out to hunt one Sunday afternoon and was returning to camp with a Grey Kangaroo when he flushed a Brush Wallaby and despite my calls and whistles, took off after it. I put the kangaroo I was carrying on a log and sat down to wait for the dog to return and take me back to his kill. However it did not work out that way, as after a while I heard the noise of a running animal and the Brush came into view closely followed by the dog. It was hard pressed and staggering slightly in its stride and obviously very close to exhaustion. It passed by me within twenty feet with the dog only a few feet behind and to my surprise seemed about to commit suicide by running straight into an

[*Miss S. J. Meagher, Assistant Curator of Anthropology and Archaeology at the Western Australian Museum, knows of only two published references to this hunting technique. (1) E. J. Eyre, *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia*, 1845, vol. ii, p. 277, stated: "Pitfalls are also dug to catch the kangaroo around the springs, or pools of water they are accustomed to frequent. These are covered lightly over with small sticks, boughs, etc. and the animal going to drink, hops upon them, and falls into the pit without being able to get out again. I have only known this method of taking the kangaroo practised in Western Australia, between Swan River and King George's Sound." (2) W. E. Roth, "Notes of Savage Life in the early days of West Australian Settlement," *Proc. Roy. Soc. Qld.*, 17 (2), 1903, referring to the Bunbury area, stated: "Kangaroos were not only stalked and speared, but trapped on favourable ground by digging along their customary tracks deep pitfalls, covered with twigs and earth. These pits were about 8 or 9 feet long, 7 or 8 feet deep, and about 10 inches wide, just leaving margin enough for the hind feet to fall into."—Ed.]

enormous old Marri tree. It all seemed to happen in an instant, the Brush looked as if it was going to crash straight into the tree, but at the very last instant it leaped sideways to the left and avoided it. Not so the dog, with his eyes glued to the Brush and about to pounce on it, he hurtled into the tree and was killed instantly. On examination he was found to have a broken neck and one of his front legs was also broken.

The interesting thing about this incident is, I think, that the dog died as the result of a planned or predetermined action by the little Brush Wallaby. Doubtless this tactic had been acquired and passed on when trying to shake off pursuit by hunting dingoes which even at that time were very numerous along the Blackwood.

For the record the following mammals were numerous and frequently seen along the Blackwood at that time:—

Grey Kangaroo, *Macropus fuliginosus*

Brush or Black-gloved Wallaby, *Macropus irma*.

Quokka, *Setonix brachyurus*.

Woylie, *Bettongia penicillata*.

Ringtail Possum, *Pseudocheirus peregrinus*.

Brush-tailed Possum, *Trichosurus vulpecula*.

Dingo, *Canis familiaris*.

FROM FIELD AND STUDY

Long-necked Tortoises in the City of Perth.—It should be recorded, while still remembered, that, until the Perth foreshore was lost to reclamation, Long-necked Tortoises (*Chelodina longicollis*), may still have sought egg-laying sites in the city area. I can recall, as late as about 1950, these creatures heading determinedly up William Street. If diverted up a lane they were temporarily confused but always tried to find a route roughly northward. Most must have perished on the roads or become hopelessly lost in city lanes.

Perth, north of the Swan River, was a city of lakes and swamps when it was founded in 1829. Subsequently most disappeared with development (see the account by D. L. Serventy, *Emu*, 47, 1948: 241), but while they existed the area must have been a haven to freshwater tortoises. One interesting near-city place where they still survive is Shenton Park Lake and the animals make their way to the gardens of neighbouring residents to lay their eggs. The annual crossing of Herbert Road for this purpose has become something of a scientific tourist attraction and is occasionally featured in the press. The Subiaco City Council now erects road-signs during this period warning motorists to avoid running over the tortoises.

—DAVID HUTCHISON, Wembley Downs.

Freckled Duck at Yanchep.—On 31st January, 1971, I was called to Loch McNess, Yanchep National Park, to identify a strange duck, but unfortunately by the time I arrived it had swum out too far to pick up with my field glasses. On the 27th February, Mr. John Elphinstone, a ranger in the park, and a member of the R.A.O.U., reported with great excitement that there was a Freckled Duck, (*Stictonetta naevosa*) amongst the Black Duck on the bank in the feed area. We returned together and there he was, quite unmistakable, and remarkably tame for a duck of a species usually regarded as shy. Dr. Tom Spence, who came up that afternoon, considered this duck to be an immature male. He was most reluctant to fly and had to be driven off the water by Tom in a boat, when he only flew a short distance. It is possible that this duck, he was identified as being of the same species as that reported on the 31st January, was a pricked bird, that had taken shelter at Yanchep to recover after the shooting season. He stayed with us, spending most of the day